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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SUBJECTIFYING VIRGINITY: THE CONCEPTUAL; THE CORPOREAL

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Abstract

This study attempts to underscore the gender positions taken up by young men and women with regard to virginity. This research has been an endeavor aimed at understanding the experiential space that the youth comes from and the subjectivities they derive from their perspective on their own sexuality. Using the qualitative research technique of discourse analysis, the focus was to develop an image of the sexual life of the participants specifically converging around the notion of virginity. From an analysis of the narratives it became apparent that the idea of virginity was much bigger in the minds of the female participants than the males. Though there has been a slight shift wherein the women give themselves some accountability with regard to agency and choice, however, it is obvious that their basic ideology about virginity still remains in the clutches of the dominant discourses of societal morality. The male participants held an easy going outlook towards virginity and thought of it more as a rite of passage than anything else. This study could be an entry point into whether there has been a shift in gender roles and subjectivities with regard to virginity and whether this is just a physical phenomenon or has been made into much more than that by attaching societal and personal decrees to it.

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Introduction:-

Being born a girl is not easy. Whether we use the lens of gender, social identity or biology. If we were to think of this in the light of the particular society that we were born and brought up in, it would take on a different meaning altogether. For example, if we think about this notion with regard to the Indian society, one would think that the identity of a woman in this country is a concept that is fraught with convolutions and conundrums. If we were to take this further and think of female sexuality, we would be adding insult to injury. In the light of the current paper, the fulcrum of which is virginity, it would be unfair to restrict it to the female perspective and marginalize the male experience. Hence, I would thus take a heterosexual lens to this subject henceforth, however, before that I think it becomes imperative to underscore the female experience with regard to virginity. If I were to think about myself and my foray into the of sexuality, I would go back to when my mother told me about the concept of menstruation. One would think that this concept would be inextricable linked to that of virginity and to speak of one would be to speak of another, however, I think it's only possible in a country like India where sexuality is so repressed that this would not be so. My mother very matter of factly told me of the experience of it, of the physical manifestation of it, a little before I turned thirteen. She never explained to me the biology of the phenomenon, why it happened, what it

meant and so on. I was left to my own devices to figure the rest out; which I was able to with the help of varied literature that I was privy to, whether it was academic or otherwise. Thus, till now it was a question of scientific knowledge, then came the societal element. From the very beginning, nothing was articulated in so many words, however, there was always an implicit doctrine with regard to virginity. It was always something that was alluded to, something to be protected, something to be safeguarded, something that translated into honor and reputation of the girl and the family. However, this was so only until the girl got married. Losing her virginity to her husband was the only way in which female sexuality was and to some extent even is, acceptable. Now that I think about it, for us girls, it was never about choice or agency, it was never about having a mind of your own, taking decisions on your own. It was always what the external world imposed on us. We were tricked into believing that what the society thought was actually what we thought as well. There were and are exceptions to the dominant discourse, however they were never truly accepted as part of the mainstream, and labelled outcasts, rebels etc. Moreover, when we come to the same subject with regard to men, there is a strange, lack of judgment when it came to their virginity. With men, it was never about safeguarding, or honor. Then why was it so for women? Is it because nature has imparted a physical barrier to a woman's virginity or is it because the ramifications for a mishap with regard to women are much greater than they are for men?

It is these questions that led me to take this topic up to see what the youth of today thought about virginity. What their stand on it was. Did they grant it the same importance that their elder's did? Did they also weave a taboo around it? The role agency and choice played. I wanted to see if there was a shift or change in the gender roles and subjectivity with regard to virginity.

Review of Literature:-

PremChowdhry's work is significant in this regard. His piece on 'Sexualities'(2007), posits that the bestowal of an unmarried girl's sexuality in marriage is crucial for patriarchal forces and their relationship with caste purity, status, power and hierarchy. One could then question what virginity signifies in today's context. Does it mean women without experience of penile-vaginal penetration or does it signify women with no sexual experience at all. As mentioned before Gilfoyle et al (1993) introduces the 'pseudo-reciprocal gift' discourse, where women are perceived as "giving" themselves to men, with regard to their bodies virginity etc. Thus, this is consistent with the cultural and religious beliefs which purport women saving themselves, their virginity for their marital partner. Men's overt gift to women is satisfaction in the form of orgasm and their implicit gift is their protection.

Lillian Rubin studied the sexual histories of almost a thousand heterosexual people in the US aged between eighteen and forty-eight in 1989. In so doing, she produced evidence revealing "a tale of change" of massive proportions in relations between men and women over the past few decades. The early sexual lives of participants over forty contrasted dramatically with those reported by younger age groups. The author begins her report with what things were like for the older generation with her own testimony, as a part of the same generation. She admits that she was a virgin at the time of her marriage during World War II, she describes herself as a girl who "followed all the rules of her day", and would never have "gone all the way". She wasn't alone in drawing clear boundaries to mark out the limits of sexual exploration, but shared codes of conduct common among her friends and acquaintances. Her prospective husband was an active participant in ensuring that those codes were complied with; his sense of sexual "rights and wrongs" matched her own. Virginity on the part of girls prior to marriage was prized by both sexes. Few girls disclosed the fact if they allowed a boyfriend to have full sexual intercourse - and many were only likely to permit such an act to happen once formally engaged to the boy in question. More sexually active girls were castigated by the others, as well as by the very males who sought to "take advantage" of them. Just as the reputation of the girls rested upon their ability to resist, or contain, sexual advances, that of the boys depended upon the sexual conquests they could achieve. Most boys gained such conquests only by, as one 45-year-old respondent put it, "fooling around with one of those girls, the sluts".

When we look at teenage sexual activity today, the good girl/bad girl distinction still appears to be prevalent to some degree, as does the idea of male conquest. But other attitudes, on the part of many teenage girls in particular, have changed quite radically. According to Rubin(1989) girls feel they have every right to engage in sexual activity, including sexual intercourse, at whatever age seems appropriate to them. In Rubin's survey, virtually no teenage girls talk of 'saving themselves' for prospective engagement and marriage. Instead, they talk of romance and commitment which acknowledges the potentially temporary nature of their early sexual engagements. Thus, in response to a question from Rubin about her sexual activities with her boyfriend, one sixteen-year-old participant said, "We love each other, so there's no reason why we shouldn't be making love". Rubin then asked to what extent

she saw herself in a long-term relationship with her partner. Her reply was: "Do you mean are we going to get married? The answer is no. Or will we be together next year? I don't now about that; that's a long time from now. Most kids don't stay together for such a long time. But we won't date anybody else as long as we're together". In previous generations, the conventional practice was for the sexually active teenage girl to play the part of innocent. According to Rubin(1989), changes in the sexual behaviour and attitudes of girls have been much more pronounced than among boys. She did talk to some boys who were sensitive about connections between sex and commitment, and who resisted the equation of sexual success and male prowess. Most, however, spoke admiringly of male friends who went with lots of girls, while condemning girls who did the same. A few girls in Rubin's sample imitated what is thought of as traditional male sexual behaviour, did so openly and with some defiance; faced with such actions, the majority of boys responded with a sense of outrage. They still wanted innocence, at least of a sort. Several young women whom Rubin interviewed, who were on the point of getting married, found it necessary to lie to their future spouses about their earlier sexual experiences.

In Michelle Fine's(1988) article on 'Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire, she presents excerpts from interviews with mainly black adolescent girls. These adolescent girls would usually be placed in the category of "troubled teens". These are cases of teenage pregnancy, drugs etc. rampant in US public schools. Since the author has offered experiences of girls belonging to a particular race and age, the tone of the article is pejorative with regard to the choices made by these adolescent girls with regard to their sexuality and the agency that they possess when it comes to abstinence. A research conducted by Dorthe STAUNÆS: From Culturally Avant-garde to Sexually Promiscuous: Troubling Subjectivities and Intersections in the Social Transition from Childhood into Youth (2003), exemplifies this concept. The focus of this research was social categories as part of positions and subjectivities, and the way in which they are used to distribute people into identity groups. In this study, the researcher utilized the experiences of pupils from a particular Danish school in which the minority constituted 50% of racial percentage of students, to illustrate her ideas on gender and sexuality. The narratives she elicited from these students put forward three main categories of girls. She chose to define them as 'perfect ones', 'the cheap ones', and 'the most boring ones', borrowing from the jargon employed by the school children. The construction of the 'perfect female seventh-grader' was supposed to be the girl who was beginning to attend parties, starting to drink alcohol, wearing body-hugging, skimpy clothes and participating in the formation of sexual-romantic relationships. The young teenage girl had to demonstrate how she controlled her feelings of sexual desire. She was not supposed to desire too intensely but manage to adjust the desire to an appropriate level. Thus she created the image of a sexually attractive girl in how she abstained from going all the way. She did not do 'it' with boys. She was the girl who was interested in boys and seemingly sexually attracted to them, but so far content with just "talking about" and "looking at". Furthermore, these young girls had to choose appropriate objects of desire: preferably the boys from the eighth and ninth grades, rather than boys at their own age. The younger boys in seventh grade were "still childish", while boys a little older were becoming "nearly men". A disinterested attitude towards boys would get some girls to fit within the category of the 'most boring ones'. Girls who did "it" with older boys and did not adhere to the norms prescribed in the "appropriate and normal school life of young girls", and thus fell into the category of "cheap girls". The researcher uses the case of Bettina, a 13 year old white, Danish girl who goes from being considered one of the most popular girls in school to being perceived in much harsher light, "cheap slut" was the term most commonly used. Bettina's transition can be understood in the light of intersecting ethnicity or, in other words, how working on the margins of ethnicity may intersect with heterosexuality in inappropriate ways. It seems as if the imperative of heterosexuality, which is concerned with desire across the way gender is perceived, comes to the fore in the transition between childhood and youth. It is not enough to fulfill the imperative just by indicating desire for the 'opposite' gender. Young people have to do so in appropriate ways, which relate to the expectations connected to their age. According to dominant voices in Bettina's school, she goes against the norm of 'perfect' heterosexuality in many ways. For example, she does not content herself with talking with or looking at boys. She does "it" despite the fact that she is only 13 years old, and further she does "it" with boys who are considerably older. Bettina is one of those girls who is, time and again pointed out as the girl who is inappropriate in the way she negotiates her gender, age, and sexuality. She is 'making noise' and in her taking up a particular subject position she is violating the norms approved with regard to "appropriate school life for young girls". Thus, through Bettina's case we see that when girls, in their transition from childhood to youth, adhere to the dominant discourses with regard to sexuality and especially virginity, they are accepted with open arms. But when somebody like Bettina tries to cross the boundaries to produce amalgamated subject positions which challenge the dominant discourses, she is branded in a troubled subject position. This then demands a subversion of the dominant discourses and categories where certain intersections are not perceived as troublesome and necessarily promiscuous for young women.

Methodology:-

The research method that has been made use of in this study is discourse analysis, specifically adhering to the Foucaultian tradition. According to Michael Arribas-Ayllon and Valerie Walkerdine (1988), a discourse can be defined as an explanation of local and heterogeneous positioning of subjects with relations of power. It not only exemplifies and describes a body of knowledge but also helps us understand mechanisms through which certain constructs, objects and strategies are propagated and in this sense also suggests the advent of this knowledge, particularly with regard to the dynamic of power.

The very foundation of Foucaultian discourse analysis is grounded in the construct of the “subject” which is a position, fostered through relations of power, and how it is brought about. Foucault calls this subjectification, which refers to the construction of subjects through the technologies of power and self (Foucault 1985, 1997). This basically refers to the fact that no subject position is upheld only within the relation of force. A subject position is maintained through the interface between these power structures and the technologies of self. What we infer from this is that a subject is constructed and sustained not only because of the existence of, for example, a particular societal ideal, but also because the people who are the “subjects”, act in ways that advocate that particular standard in order to attain that ethical goal. For example, with regard to the present research, one of the subject positions that could exist could be the woman as the helpless, passive recipient of the man’s sexual desire. This subject position exists not just because the man or the society characterize the woman in this manner but also because in some way the woman acts in a way to propagate this notion in order to possibly be perceived as “good”, “respectable” etc. It is this individual-society interface that makes up the basis of Foucaultian discourse analysis.

If we were to see this research in this light, the juxtaposition of the individual and society can be seen here in terms of the construction of sexuality and how these constructions have come into being. The subjectifications here may be that of “the good woman”, “the bad woman”, “the bold woman”, “the slut”, “the philandering man” etc. The reason why there could be these many and other subjectifications as well is precisely because there are two elements at play here, one of power and one of self. If power was the only force that constituted subjects, then there would be only one subjectification.

Another recommendation for using Foucaultian discourse analysis is that according to Parker (1999), it can be carried out on autobiographical accounts. Since the nature of the research entails an in depth account of the participants’ sexual history, this would provide means for being privy to continuities or discontinuities of experience over time and the way in which the participants constitute their self as an object of particular discourses. This could entail how men and women characterize and insinuate their sexuality within the discourses of desire and pleasure.

Procedure:-

The course of choosing participants was accomplished through the process of theoretical sampling. I wanted upper-middle class men and women, living in New Delhi, who fell between the age bracket of 18-24 to be part of my study. This was because it was important to choose participants who were more likely to talk about their sexuality, and more importantly whose sense of self was still developing with regard to their sexual experiences. This study includes both men and women in the study because this would give the research more depth and an integrated perspective. The study was limited to heterosexual people because, the power dynamic that results in men and women making choices with regard to their sexuality and the agency that they take up when it comes to their own virginity was an important area that I wanted to explore through this study. The total number of participants in this study were five, three women (A, B and C) aged, 23, 22 and 21 and two men (D and E) aged 22 and 23 years of age, respectively. The participants were either acquaintances, people whom I didn’t know very well, or people suggested by other friends and acquaintances that fit my criteria. I met each of these participants and took notes while I talked to them. I had initially planned on recording the conversations, however, none of the participants were comfortable with that. I wrote down the case histories immediately after meeting with the each participant to be sure that I wouldn’t forget anything. After obtaining all my field notes, I then started to organize the narratives of the participants on the basis of the research questions that had been developed previously and began to draw parallels with the literature that I had read. The final picture was a collation of the individual narratives, assimilated thematically according to the research questions, while attempting to interpret, at times obvious, and other times obscure meanings behind the participant’s thoughts.

Analysis and Discussion:-

We see a plethora of responses to the notion of virginity and its impact on the sexual lives of the youngsters today, where we also see a slight disparity between the female and the male participants. Among the female participants we see three different perspectives. Where A revels in her sexuality and sees it as something entirely her own, something that nobody has the right to dictate and interfere with and something that nobody else has the right to control but herself. She thinks of it as a fact of life, a lifestyle choice that she has made and something that is uniquely individual to each person. She is of the opinion that nobody has the right to judge another on the basis of the choice he/she has made with regard to their sexuality. She and her boyfriend not only indulge in sexual intercourse on a daily basis, since it is a way of life for them, they even experiment and try different things to keep the excitement alive. For example “we watch porn, use sex toys to get aroused and revel in a very satisfactory sexual relationship”. We see an immediate and stark difference the narratives of the other two girls. While B said that even though she felt that there was nothing wrong in pre-marital sex, and the fact that one should know the person they are marrying in every way, she would never be able to go through with it. It was just the values that had been inculcated in her and something she couldn't go against even if she wanted to; C was of the opinion she will only have sex after she gets married. She feels that “otherwise why get married, there should be something new to look forward to in that new phase of life”. She greatly questions the value system of the people who indulge in sex before marriage. Here we see the notion of sexuality deep in the clutches of parental influence and controlled of the super-ego. All their decisions with regard to sexuality are not entirely individual, they contain a significant element of external influence which has taken root in the psyche of these individuals as a result of which their sexuality in some senses is not their own. Where B feels that one should know their partner in everyway, she does not see herself indulging in pre-marital sex, this concurs with PremChowdhry's (2007) idea that the inevitable conflict within a world view where such contradictory beliefs and attitudes are concomitant, especially with regard to sexuality brings forward the dichotomy between ideology and practice. At the same times, we see C maintaining a condemnatory attitude towards those people who engage in pre-marital sex. This is consistent with the cultural and religious beliefs which purport women saving themselves, their virginity for their marital partner. Not only this, their views about virginity also become clear when they both opine that it constitutes penile-vaginal penetration and doing “other stuff” is alright. Thus, here we see that virginity becomes more than just a concept. This is concomitant with the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse, where the woman is seen as “giving” the man her body or virginity. This was further reiterated in their ideas about casual sex where A said that “casual sex is a personal choice, I would not judge anybody who indulged in it but I feel that there would be a lack of intimacy which would make the experience hollow and unfulfilling”, while B and C concurred by saying something along the same lines.

Among the male participants, we see that even though they afford the sexual aspect of a relationship importance, we also see them having a much more laid back attitude as compared to the female participants. They don't appear to impart virginity as much importance. D said that a number of his friends were not virgins, some had been with their girlfriends, others had had one night stands and “they do tease me for never having done it”. But he said that he would never cheat on his girlfriend. He feels that it is not that great a need because of which one should break another person's trust. This also confers a limit on the male sexual drive discourse where for men, sex is perceived as a biological need. He was of the opinion that “there cannot be intimacy in sex if there aren't feelings and without intimacy it's just an act, a release which I could obtain through masturbation also”. E corroborated this when he said that even though he has been single for the past one and a half years now and is ready for a new relationship, and that he felt his sexual needs coming to the fore during this time, however he does not believe in casual sex. “I am not the kind of person who would have sex for the heck of it, it has to mean something otherwise it's just an act”. With regard to a future relationship he said that her being a virgin or not would not matter to him. He thinks it's a personal choice and “if she wanted to abstain even with him, I will understand and let her take her time”. Through the narratives of both the male participants, we see that a deviance from the norm. Where men are usually perceived as awarding sex a place on the highest mantle with regard to relationships, the narratives of these two men present a refreshing change where they do think about it, they do feel that it constitutes an important part of the relationship, they however award more importance to the feelings of intimacy, love and mutual respect.

Conclusion:-

The intention with this research was to see whether there had been a shift in perspective with regard to virginity vis-à-vis men and women. The aim was to know if women in the modern Indian, metropolitan world granted themselves agency when it came to their own virginity. The focus was also to know where the modern Indian man stood in this context. From a collation of the narratives, it became apparent, that with regard to the women, there had been

change, young women thought it was a question of choice rather than imposition, however, the underlying tone of their respective accounts was rooted in the external, pejorative and restricted attitude towards sexuality and its expression. Even when we see a positive approach towards virginity, sexuality, choice and agency, it is seen as a conscious effort to be different, to be assertive, to be a rebel. This reiterates the existence of the same pejorative ideology and the need to be different just because it existed. Thus, the question of subjectivity and individuality has yet again been thwarted and sacrificed at the altar of social rectitude. With regard to the men, it was seen that their attitude towards virginity was much more easygoing. For them it was much more a natural rite of passage than a virtue. The male has his own pressures as seen through the narratives, however, the choice becomes easier for them, possibly because they don't carry the baggage of societal morality that the external world reserves for the female. Thus, we see that virginity is still purported more importance and meaning for a woman as compared to a man and indeed is more of a concept than corporeality.

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